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SIERRA CLUB WRESTLES WITH THE NATIVISM IN ENVIRONMENTALISM

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The environmental movement is at a crossroads. It needs to decide which tradition will guide its future, one of environmental elitism and social isolation, or one of environmental justice and social progressivism. This choice is at the heart of the current battle within the Sierra Club over whether to endorse a resolution calling for stiff restrictions on immigration. Ballots go out this week to club members. Its leadership and chapter members nervously await the tally, for the outcome could shape the organization's political future and influence the broader environmental agenda.

Anti-immigrant attitudes among environmentalists are not new. Early in the 20th century, leaders in some local and national preservationist organizations deplored the influx of immigrants, first Italians and Jews and then Chinese and Japanese. In western Pennsylvania, for example, tensions were explosive between wildlife enthusiasts who hunted for sport and Italian immigrants who hunted for food.

Many leaders of preservationist groups played key roles in early 20th-century nativist movements. Among them were William Hornaday, Madison Grant and Henry Fairfield Osborn. They contended that lower-class immigrants were displacing the country's native-born Anglos and thereby undermining American beliefs in the value of wilderness. Grant, for one, went further and developed explicitly racial arguments that predicted a coming "racial abyss" because of immigration. Similarly minded environmentalists joined forces with the burgeoning eugenics movement, which considered immigrants and racial minorities biologically inferior. They urged restrictions on their ability to reproduce.

Immigrants were identified with America's rapidly growing cities, where they worked in polluting factories and lived in crowded tenements. To some upper-class environmentalists, urban culture was responsible for fouling the air with industrial toxins. Immigrants inhabiting the cities, they argued, threatened to overwhelm the wildlife and wilderness areas untouched by city excesses.

There was another wing of the early 20th-century environmental movement, one that embraced urban life and immigrants' contributions to America. It included Jane Addams, the founder of modern social work, Alice Hamilton, a pioneer in public health and industrial medicine and Florence Kelley, a leader in the crusade to protect children from workplace abuse. This wing championed an urban- and industrial-focused environmentalism that aimed to protect poor and working people, including immigrants, from the environmental hazards associated with urban slums. Among its targets were the dangers of lead poisoning, the pollution of local streams and rivers, the public-health menace posed by uncollected garbage and the lack of urban parks and playgrounds.

These environmental reformers saw a common link between environmental degradation and economic and social injustice; immigrants were victims of industrial polluters. They helped organize poor communities and labor unions to fight for safer neighborhoods and workplaces. They were the political muscle and brains behind the first tenement reforms and the laws on occupational health and public sanitation.

These contrasting environmentalist traditions resurfaced in the 1960s and 1970s. Again, the issues were population growth and immigration, and community-based concerns about pollution and the environmental hazards of daily life. The divisions threatened to undermine promising coalitions that had sprung up around Earth Day, in 1970, and around such legislative initiatives as the Occupational Safety and Health Act, which made workplace hazards a key environmental concern, and the Clean Air Act, which had the potential to stimulate changes in transportation and industry practices.

The Sierra Club divided between those who said the organization should "actively involve itself in the conservation problems . . . of the urban poor and the ethnic minorities," as one 1971 club referendum measure put it, and those who feared that any link with social-justice crusades would undermine preservation of the natural environment.

The conflict between these visions is at the center of today's debate. Many members and leaders of mainstream environmental groups, the Sierra Club included, recognize that environmentalism is not simply preserving wilderness areas as scenic resources. It is also rooted in such issues as food security, community-based transportation, the siting of toxic facilities, quality of water and air, and the conditions of daily life in cities and workplaces.

Concerns about population and immigration, by contrast, are issues of political and economic power—who controls the use of resources, how resources are used and their effects. At best, the anti-immigrant factions within the Sierra Club and other environmental groups are addressing the wrong kinds of issues. At worst, their cause reflects an economic and social elitism primarily concerned with keeping poor people out of their neighborhoods, schools and country clubs. They prefer to scapegoat immigrants rather than focus on corporate polluters.

Which tradition should environmentalism build on? If the movement is to become part of a larger progressivism, it should be mindful of its roots in urban environmentalism and social justice: Hull House on Chicago's Halstead Street, where Addams and her allies proclaimed a new vision of civic life that viewed immigrants and the poor as important contributors to a vibrant society, not as outcasts undermining the nation's social and environmental fabric.

Credit: Robert Gottlieb is author of "Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement." Peter Dreier is coauthor of "Growing Together: Linking Regional and Community Development." Both are professors at Occidental College

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